

# MASS MoCA

## ***Deep Water***

### **ENGLISH WALL TEXT**

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*“He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny’s witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew.”*

—James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” (1957)

In James Baldwin’s short story, the narrator—brother to the titular piano player—ponders the bandleader’s interaction with Sonny during a performance in a Harlem nightclub. In great jazz and blues, songs shift and grow as performers draw on their relationship to the genres’ deep histories: each performance is a risk, as the musicians immerse themselves in those depths anew.

*Deep Water* is the third of a series of rotating exhibitions drawn from a single private collection of music photography. The photographs here bear witness to a wellspring period in modern jazz and blues, and celebrate Black musicians from the 1950s-60s including Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and Nina Simone.

During this period, New York was central to both the jazz scene and the growing civil rights movement. Though America’s virulent racism ultimately led many of these artists, thinkers and activists to emigrate to Europe, jazz and blues remained foundational for the era’s activist music. A coda at the end of the exhibition includes photographs of the next generation of musicians, artists, and activists—including Labelle, Sun Ra, Gil Scott-Heron, and Huey Newton—whose practices were shaped by 1950s and 60s jazz and blues as they ventured out for deep waters.